

**INQUIRY INTO PLANNING PROCESS IN NEWCASTLE
AND THE BROADER HUNTER REGION**

Organisation: EcoTransit Sydney

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A submission to Legislative Council Inquiry

Planning process in Newcastle and the broader Hunter region

By EcoTransit Sydney

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1. EcoTransit Sydney

EcoTransit Sydney is a not-for-profit public and active transport advocacy group. Our submission relates to item 2(e) “the decision to terminate the Newcastle rail line at Wickham and any proposal to construct light rail including along Hunter and Scott Streets”, and item 2(f), “any related matters”. We seek leave to address the inquiry.

The Inquiry may find the following videos on EcoTransit's YouTube Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/user/EcoTransitSydney> of interest:

'Don't derail Newcastle': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UloQqoB1p1I>

'Let's get the fast train to Newcastle': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoPpKKmtNnE>

2. Public confidence in the planning process has been shattered

For many years, public discussion of the Newcastle's economic revitalisation has been dominated by a single purported solution: removal of the heavy rail track between Wickham and Newcastle stations. This measure has been heavily and persistently promoted by a small clique of Newcastle businesspersons, the affairs of which have recently achieved public notoriety through the Independent Commission Against Corruption's Operation Spicer.

It is not the purpose of this submission to revisit these relationships in detail as they are a matter of the very recent public record. The clique has been shown to have had improperly influential connections to politicians as well as privileged *entré* to planning authorities and consequently have had undue influence in planning matters. The resulting processes almost completely excluded the public. In the result, confidence in the planning process has been shattered. A substantial period of open consultation and reassessment will be required before it can be regained. In the interim closure of the rail line should be put on indefinite hold.

3. Economic benefits of truncation are untested

Vast claims have been made for the economic benefits of truncation but these claims have not been tested against potential benefits flowing from investment in alternative transport and planning strategies.

Above all, the advantages accruing to Newcastle from the existence of direct heavy rail access into Newcastle CBD appear to have been ignored in planning decisions. If they have been considered, that consideration has not been exposed to the fresh air of public review.

Matters have been presented as though removal of the line would, at a stroke, open a cornucopia of possibilities in relation to public use of the foreshore while at the same time providing a large area for redevelopment (presumable in terms of both accommodation, retail premises and office space). But a sober examination of the area in question shows this claim to be outlandish (see Figures 1 and 2, attached). In fact very little land of value to public recreation would, or could, be added, except in areas that the interests driving the planning process seek to develop. The picture of a great swath of land being released for public recreation and enjoyment is dishonest.

In recreational terms, the most valuable space would potentially be at the east end of the precinct, adjacent to Newcastle Station and the parkland to the north-east of it. But here, the space between the south side of the rail line (that is, along Hunter Street) and the foreshore is very narrow. On the north side of the line, the space is dominated by the 4-lane Wharf Road. Even the removal of Wharf Road would add little, recreationally speaking. Further west the foreshore has already been appropriated by recent redevelopments until a larger belt of currently undeveloped land is encountered near Wickham Station, on either side of Honeysuckle Drive. But even this area isn't particularly large and any worthwhile addition of open space would appropriate much of it.

In short, a concrete examination of the claims shows that a very substantial proportion of any land on which high-rise buildings could be constructed lies within the narrow rail corridor, that the total area of such land is relatively small, and that redevelopment would result in a curtain-wall of high-rise structures that would negate the purported aim of “opening up” the historic core of Newcastle to the foreshore.

The vision of broad pedestrian spaces flowing from Hunter Street and the historic core of the Newcastle CBD to a waterfront wonderland of public recreation space is a mirage that vanishes upon critical examination.

4. The light rail alternative

EcoTransit Sydney has been a great and consistent advocate of light rail. Our organisation was the leading proponent of the very successful Dulwich Hill light rail extension. We also campaigned for the CBD–South East Light Rail (CSELR) and have critically supported the present government's general scheme for this. We also critically support Parramatta City Council's light rail aspirations.

Appropriately used, light rail is a boon, but we believe that the decision to replace the existing heavy rail link direct to the historic core of Newcastle with light rail would be, in transport terms, a gigantic step backwards. (This is not to say that in the future, a light rail service, connecting directly to suburbs not serviced by heavy rail, might not usefully run along Hunter Street, as was the case before the removal of Newcastle's original tram network.)

Globally, direct CBD to CBD heavy rail access is the holy grail of public transport planning. Between Sydney and Newcastle this already exists. In terms of commercial development the permanent removal of this asset would be counterproductive.

The Baird government proposes to allocate around \$460m, mostly proceeds from the sale of the port of Newcastle, towards a promised light rail link between Wickham and the historic Newcastle CBD.

The line would be about 2.5km in length and would therefore cost \$184m per (double) track kilometre. Recent light rail “start-ups” in equivalent small European cities (and there have been many) have come in at between \$30m and \$40m per kilometre. This would make the very simple Newcastle project four and a half times higher than the per-kilometre cost of the most expensive

recent European start-up.

This is an extraordinarily high sum for such a tiny project and the committee should regard it as *prima facie* evidence of extraordinary planning incompetence, or something worse, bearing in mind that official Treasury-sanctioned estimates of project cost will inevitably set the level for the final cost to the public purse.

No factor of topography, geology, urban form, historic structures or complications related to underground services could remotely account for such a difference. In fact all of these factors have typically been far more challenging in most of the European projects.

5. The economic benefits of heavy rail modernisation not considered

The question that then arises is: could the funds allocated for the removal of direct services into the CBD and their replacement by a slower, lower capacity, alternative be employed to greater economic benefit?

EcoTransit is not aware of any publicly accessible planning review, undertaken over the last quarter of a century, that has examined the economic benefits of upgrading rail services between Hornsby and Newcastle Station, and indeed between the Hunter Valley towns and Newcastle, although it is self-evident that these would be shared across the whole region.

By contrast, any economic flow-on from truncation of the Newcastle line would at best be limited to the creation of a marginal amount of new residential accommodation and office space, the value of which would be discounted by the longer commuter journey time imposed by the necessity for travellers to transfer to any light rail line that might be established.

In terms of value for the public dollar, the available funds would be better allocated to works to reduce trip times on the existing heavy rail system between Newcastle and Sydney (and therefore between Newcastle and the Central Coast) and between Newcastle and the Hunter Valley.

The rail distance from Central to Newcastle is 169 km. Compared to best international practice the journey time Sydney-Newcastle is very slow. Current fastest time is 2 hrs 36 mins with stops at 16 stations (these services are hourly). The alternate services, with stops at 36 stations are 2 hrs 57 min.

In the steam era, the fastest scheduled services were 2 hrs 18 mins. The extra time now taken results from more local stations being serviced more often as Central Coast population grew. True express services no longer exist. A true express service would stop at a maximum of six stations.

Current top speeds are 100 km/h which is about 10-15 km/h below the original design speed of the existing rolling stock and well below the capacity of the new generation of fast interurban trains now being introduced overseas.

There are some improvements that can be made in the short term that could reduce the current fastest time of 2hrs 36mins by up to 26 minutes, giving a time of 2hrs 10mins between Sydney Central and Newcastle.

Other improvements would further reduce the travel time to below 2hrs, but these improvements would take longer and require a higher level of investment.

While the Main Northern Line between Hornsby and Newcastle traverses much difficult terrain (particularly between Hornsby and Gosford) the rail easement is, over most of the route, generous,

and long sections traverse relatively flat “greenfield” terrain where quadruplication could be easily accomplished with no disruption to ongoing rail operations.

An indicative program of works to achieve Sydney – Newcastle journey times below 2 hrs is attached (Attachment 1).

6. Schemes to achieve permeability without line closure not considered

Even accepting that a high level of pedestrian access between Hunter Street and the precincts north of the line between Wickham and Newcastle stations is desirable or important (as the truncation advocated argue), there have apparently been no objective and comprehensive studies (or none have been publicly accessible) into viable alternatives to complete closure of the line, in terms of the closure exponents' preferred outcome.

From time to time, several obvious solutions to the putative problem have been advocated. Others can be imagined. They include:

- Lowering the line over part of the distance so that pedestrian and vehicle traffic could cross above it “at grade”.
- Raising the track to achieve the same result.
- A combination of both the above.
- Slowing trains slightly, setting the track as flange rail in grass or paving, in the manner common for light rail in Europe, and allowing pedestrians to cross the track at grade at a number of broad crossing points with automatic control gates and appropriate signalling.

These solutions are all technically possible (subject to rail line gradient issues), but what is important is that they have never been assessed by an objective planning process accessible to the public and at arm's length from private interests.

7. Recommendations

1. An authoritative regional planning commission should be appointed to reexamine the whole issue of Newcastle, Hunter Region and the Central Coast transport and planning. This commission should be professionally staffed and should specifically exclude representatives of business interests and senior public servants who have previously dealt with planning issues pertaining to the area under study. All dealings, studies and submissions should be made public in a timely fashion. The commission should hold public hearings and should subject all alternative proposals to cost-benefit analysis.
2. All plans to truncate the Newcastle rail line should be suspended and full service should be retained until the planning commission completes its work and its report is considered by Parliament.
3. All existing planning and infrastructure studies, documents and proposals in relation to Newcastle, Hunter Region and Central Coast, whether emanating in the NSW public service or submitted to the government by private interests should be available for public review. Any refusal to release such studies or proposals on the grounds of “commercial-in-confidence” should automatically exclude them from further consideration.
4. The proposed commission should give early consideration to an open urban design competition for the inner Newcastle precincts that is predicated on the retention of heavy rail service to Newcastle Station. This would produce a range of creative options to compare to the current, objectively untested proposal for truncation.

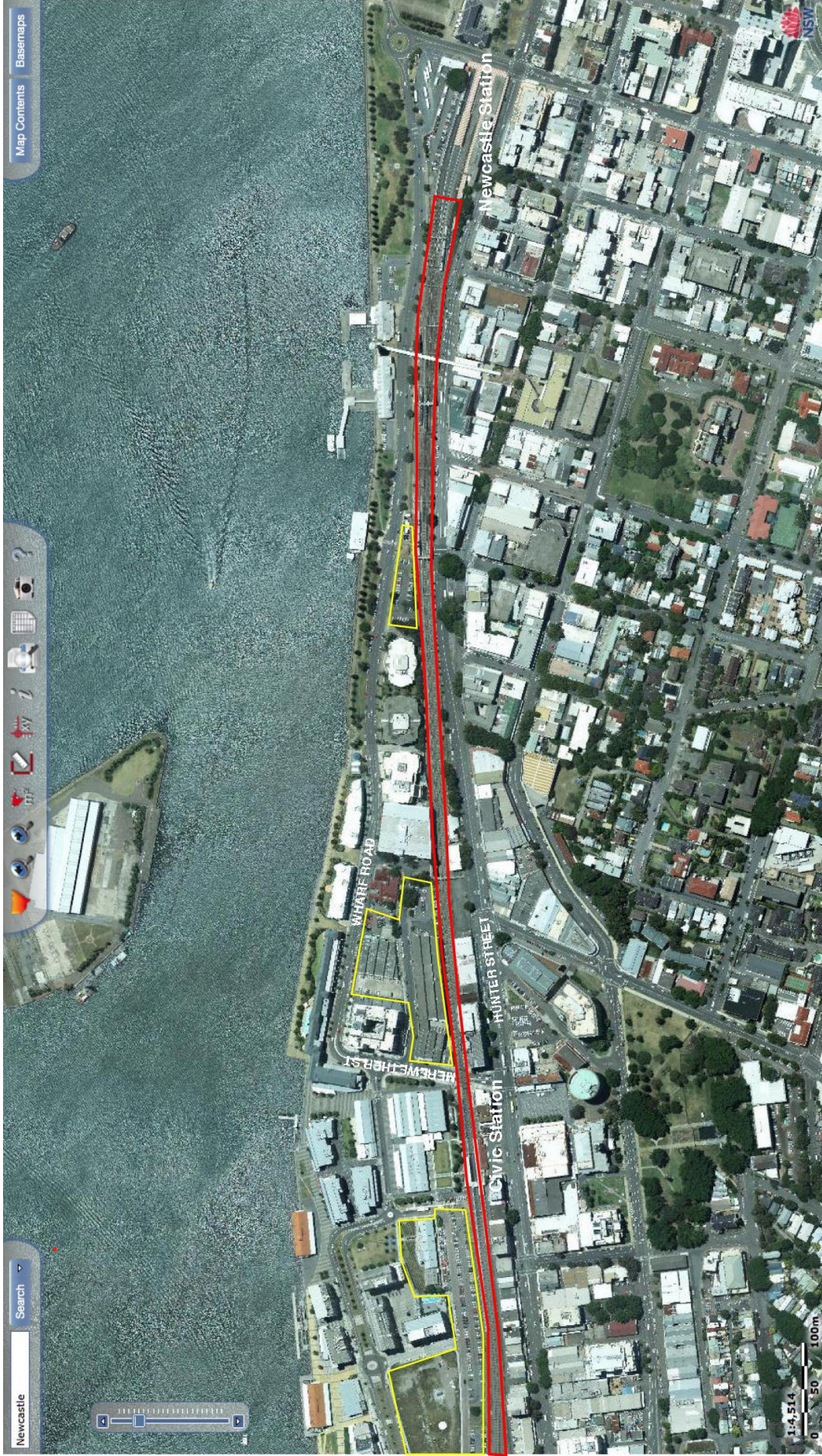


Figure 1: Newcastle CBD to Foreshore – Civic Stn to Newcastle Stn section

Redevelopable rail corridor shown in red. Realistically remaining redevelopable land between the rail and the harbour shown in yellow. In the 1.2km between the left of this view and the west end of Newcastle Station, almost all the land has already been redeveloped, or is occupied by heritage buildings (many renovated). Redevelopment of the rail corridor land (added to adjacent available land) would create a curtain wall of buildings blocking north-south views and access, thereby negating the purported benefits of truncation. From an amenity point of view Wharf Road is more of a problem than the rail easement. In terms of public recreational access the most important precinct is north and east of Newcastle station and apart from the problem created by Wharf Road is generally easily accessible. (Air photo: Six Maps)



Figure 2: Newcastle CBD to Foreshore – Wickham Stn to Civic Stn section

Redevelopable rail corridor shown in red. Realistically remaining redevelopable land between the rail and the harbour shown in yellow. Potentially redevelopable rail corridor land stops well east of Wickham because the proposed light rail would use the rail corridor in this section. If the real aim of redevelopment is to create public recreational access to the foreshore much of the area outlined in yellow would be reserved for open space. Redevelopment of the rail corridor land (added to adjacent available land) would create a curtain wall of buildings blocking north-south views and access, thereby negating the purported benefits of truncation. From an amenity point of view Honey'suckle Drive is more of a problem than the rail easement. (Air photo: Six Maps)